White Paper

White Paper Report

Report ID: 111894

Application Number: #PW-51549-14

Project Director: Siobhan Senier (Siobhan.Senier@unh.edu)

Institution: University of New Hampshire

Reporting Period: 5/1/2014-4/30/2016

Report Due: 7/31/16

Date Submitted: 7/31/16

Name of Project: Writing of Indigenous New England: Building Partnerships for the Preservation of Regional Native American Literature
Institution: University of New Hampshire
Project Director: Siobhan Senier
Award Amount: $39, 655
To support: project and planning activities associated with *Indigenous New England Digital Collections*
Project Website: dawnlandvoices.org

White Paper

This grant supported small-scale digitization projects in regional tribal archives that have not historically received much material support for preservation and access. Our primary goal was to increase the visibility of writing by indigenous people from New England. More broadly, we wanted to understand precisely what kinds of resources and support small tribal collections need to begin digitizing their own collections.

New England's regional identity is predicated on the myth of vanishing Indians, and consequently Native people here are doubly marginalized and invisible. Our team is especially perplexed by the lack of recognition of the long histories of northeastern Native *writing*: even among professional scholars of Native American literature, only a few early figures like Samson Occom (Mohegan) and William Apess (Pequot) are routinely studied or taught. The participants in this grant all contributed materials from their considerable community collections to the print volume *Dawnland Voices: An Anthology of Indigenous Writing from New England* (U of Nebraska P, 2014). By the time this nearly 700-page book was published, we wanted a living document, one that could grow to reflect the wealth of literature produced and preserved not by mainstream publishing and archiving institutions, but by Native communities themselves.

NEH supported two things: a planning session and three pilot digitization projects. In November 2014, we met for two days at the University of New Hampshire. On Day 1, we benefitted from the expertise of Paul Grant-Costa (Yale Indian Papers Project), Jane Anderson (New York University) and James Francis (Penobscot Nation Cultural & Historic Preservation Office) as we considered issues in indigenous intellectual property and university-community collaborations. On Day 2, UNH librarians and archivists offered a hands-on introduction to digitization fundamentals.

We began with a prototype on indigenousnewengland.com. Built in Omeka, this site featured a number of items and exhibits where digital content (e.g., photographs of Abenaki baskets) was contributed by external partners, then uploaded and curated by university students. Our editorial team changed the URL to dawnlandvoices.org and proposed a two-part structure: *Dawnland Voices 2.0* is essentially an online literary magazine devoted to contemporary, born-digital writing; *Indigenous New England Digital Collections* is a space for tribal archivists and others to contribute historic materials from their collections. We developed terms of use and some basic metadata standards. We agreed that Omeka is working for our purposes for the foreseeable future.

Although we admire Mukurtu for its ability to build in culturally specific protocols for protecting and managing cultural heritage items, none of our members at present have the resources to learn and adopt a new CMS, and none anticipate posting culturally sensitive material any time soon.

Our three pilot sites were deliberately chosen to represent a range of regional tribal archiving scenarios. The Tomaquag Museum in Rhode Island is a small community-based museum, operated for decades largely through the dedication of a cohort of dedicated volunteers. Though it has historically had only modest financial support for archiving from the Narragansett Tribe or from public and private funding agencies, it cares for hundreds of lineal feat of precious documents. The Passamaquoddy Tribal Historic Preservation Office exemplifies a situation found in many tribal offices: though not necessarily equipped for professional archiving nor officially designated for such, it has become an impromptu repository for a rapidly growing body of elders' papers, historic documents, baskets, and other important material objects. The Indigenous Resources Collaborative (IRC), based in Plymouth, MA, represents a common situation across many indigenous communities, whereby priceless documents and objects are being preserved and cared for solely by dedicated and knowledgeable community-based scholars, often in their own homes.

UNH librarians visited each site to set up small digitization stations (laptop, scanner, and some rudimentary OCR software). Each site received a day and a half of training in proper scanning techniques, file formats and digital storage, and metadata creation and maintenance. The results at each collection were shaped by the material conditions therein. At Tomaquag, staff were able to continue scanning on-site immediately after the training, and generated over 1300 digital documents in a relatively short period of time. They also produced detailed documentation about their in-house process, as well as metadata records for both digital and print items. The Passamaquoddy office also continued to scan a large number of documents, but kept only partial records of the metadata for the digital items, seeming eventually to abandon the spreadsheet altogether. The IRC shares a space with another nonprofit, and as its members live varying distances from that site, it is not feasible for them to work at their digitization station consistently or frequently. There was thus a lag time after the IRC's training, and some of the specifics of scanning (e.g, proper dpi or document preparation) were forgotten, along with the necessity of keeping scrupulous track of filenames. For tribal historians like these, unfamiliar with Excel and other computing basics, the creation and maintenance of a metadata spreadsheet proved too difficult, at least with such short training.

Each of the three collections submitted a selection of digital files to Siobhan Senier for showcasing in an electronic exhibit, [Untold Histories of Activism in Indigenous New England](). The theme of this exhibit was agreed upon at our November 2014 planning meeting, and was intended to draw attention to the cultural and political persistence of indigenous communities in New England, with special emphasis on the twentieth century. The Tomaquag Museum contributed examples from the papers of [Princess Red Wing](), illustrating the intellectual work and activism of an indigenous woman between the 1930s and 1950s. The [Passamaquoddy]() office contributed several newsletters

produced during the 1970s and 1980s, the heady days just before and after federal recognition, when tribal people used new resources for communication and self-determination. The IRC selected several key writings of Wampanoag intellectuals—from informal powwow flyers to glossy museum publications—pieces that describe their people's reclamation of ancient practices that help them self-identify for the twentieth century and beyond.

This initial exhibit conveys a story too little told. We cannot, in fact, think of a single scholarly monograph or other electronic collection that similarly illustrates indigenous community- and nation-building in New England during the latter half of the twentieth century. To the contrary, most existing resources on indigenous New England focus on the colonial period, thereby perpetuating the myth that Native communities disappeared or were assimilated early on. By highlighting documents that have been preserved by the communities themselves, rather than by Western collecting institutions, our exhibit challenges the regional narrative of Indian disappearance to demonstrate Native people's adaptability, sustainability and resurgence.

The biggest (and most predictable) challenge in our project was metadata. Because none of these collections have detailed finding aids, much less MARC records, metadata for the print items are being created on the spot, along with the records for the digital items. At the Tomaquag Museum this process unfolded more or less systematically, although it should be admitted that some metadata about the print items remains unrecorded. Metadata recording proved extremely challenging at the other two sites, raising the question of what our next steps should be. We have no doubt that with more training and time, the tribal historians are fully capable of learning and implementing these systems. What is less clear is whether scanning and recording constitute the best use of their time and expertise, especially at the lesser-staffed and more under-resourced collections. It may be that, especially for the IRC, it might be wiser to have university students visit the site to perform the scanning and metadata recording, much as Grace Yeh does with her Re/Collecting Project in California.

Albeit challenging, metadata is in some ways also the most exciting future area of focus for our team. All of the tribal historians report that the digitization process has allowed them to *see* their collections in new ways. The selection of individual documents for scanning and uploading generated considerable excitement as, for instance, when an elder connected to the Tomaquag Museum recounted stories of how Red Wing came to write a particular letter, who her interlocutors were, and what was going on at the time. We realize that the exigencies of metadata collection will make these projects difficult to scale; but the work of this grant has also prompted us to think different about questions of scale in the first place. The current push in the Digital Humanities is always for the large database that will be searchable, interoperable with other systems, and "usable" in a variety of research settings. While we understand the value of such databases for a variety of projects, we are also wary of letting the imperative to scale divert us from our more immediate purpose, which is *to tell the story of indigenous persistence in New England*.

It is not just the exigencies of metadata collection, of course, that complicate the scaling of these projects. The Association for Tribal Archives, Libraries and Museums (ATALM) has found that, though digitization now represents the state of the field, the vast majority of tribal archives are currently not digitizing any of their holdings. Our project experience fully revealed many of the structural and material obstacles to digitization. For us, these included unreliable internet connections, lack of consistent or full-time staffing, out-of-date versions of Microsoft Office and other basic software, password problems, the logistical difficulties of convening far-flung colleagues and community members, and a variety of other professional and personal obligations that threaten to interrupt what is essentially temporary or volunteer labor on a project. We also severely underestimated the amount of training time that tribal elders and historians would need to master the complexities of digital preservation, as well as the deep need for sustained, *face to face* follow up and meeting time. In November 2016, the University of New Hampshire will support a follow-up meeting of our partners as we consider how, where and when to enlist university students to help sustain our project.

Our project brings a new perspective to two major themes within what we might call Native American and Indigenous Digital Humanities (NAIDH). First, scholars in this field have been invested in so-called digital repatriation, whereby non-Native museums, archives and libraries create electronic surrogates of materials that are then theoretically available to the source communities that created them. The emphasis on digital repatriation, we have found, sidesteps the simple fact that indigenous communities do have archives of their own, and that these archives often contain very different materials than those deemed worthy of preservation by colonial institutions. Contrary, for instance, to missionary or ethnographic reports that are routinely archived and pondered for their apparent evidence of cultural loss or assimilation, "Untold Histories" provides a glimpse at tribally-stewarded documents that show New England's indigenous people (after all, some of the longest survivors of colonialism in the U.S.), continually reasserting their right to their own cultural heritage and history.

Second, NAIDH is rightly preoccupied with questions of intellectual property and culturally appropriate protocols for sharing heritage materials. The emphasis on cultural protocols is intensely important, but it alone cannot address the structural obstacles faced by small tribal collections wishing to digitally share and preserve their materials. It is not enough to build powerful tools like Omeka or Mukurtu and hope that, with a small initial outlay of equipment and training, tribal collections will be able to sustain these digitization efforts. As we know from other major digital literary projects, digitization requires substantive long-term investment—investment of which, we believe, community tribal collections are no less deserving than Yale or the American Philosophical Society. If anything, a critical re-imagining of existing print canons in digital space will require a reorientation of funding priorities toward the most vulnerable community collections.